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SUBJECT: THE VANISHING AZERBAIJANI OPPOSITION

Classified By: Ambassador Anne E. Derse, per 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (C) Summary: The Azerbaijani Opposition has been in a steady decline since the 2005 parliamentary elections, beleaguered by government pressure and its own chronic disunity. According to a 2006 IFES public opinion poll, support for the traditional opposition parties has dropped to five percent. Opposition leaders believe Ilham Aliyev's unwillingness to allow conventional political activity betrays his insecurity and inexperience as a politician. The abrupt jailing of ex-Ministers Farhad Aliyev and Ali Insanov in October 2005 suggests that rivals for power exist within the government as well as from the opposition. Some also point to the lack of political avenues for dissent as contributing to the development of religious extremism. End Summary.

Pushed to Extinctio

¶2. (C) During the reign of President Heydar Aliyev (1993-2003), the Azerbaijani Opposition was skillfully manipulated by the government, but did have some popular support, political legitimacy and served as a weak, but respected, institution within the political system. After four years of Ilham Aliyev, the traditional opposition is all but extinct. Former State Secretary and chair of the Popular Front Party (PFP) Ali Kerimli predicts that if things do not change in the remaining three to five-year window, there will be no political opposition at all.

¶3. (SBU) Pulling up to opposition Godfather Isa Gambar's office, you'd think you made a wrong turn somewhere. He has been exiled to a remote corner of Baku in a dilapidated apartment building. Although the Musavat Party has two floors of the building all of the rooms are dark and the corridors appear to be undergoing a massive renovation. Our escort apologizes for the mess and admits that the construction of the office has been ongoing for two years and may never be completed because of a lack of funds. Gambar sits in one of the only renovated rooms with his curtains drawn and a noisy TV left on during meetings, presumably trying to defeat listening devices.

¶4. (SBU) Former State Secretary and leader of the Azerbaijan Liberal Party (ALP) Lala Shovket works out of a friend's building in a dusty, garbage-filled river basin on the edge of town. In a more dismal situation than the others, Ali Kerimli, who has aged dramatically in the last four years, is forced to work out of his personal apartment after the

government forcibly evicted his party from its downtown office in November 2006. Kerimli complains that landlords are pressured by the government not to rent office space to opposition parties.

Even the Paranoid have Enemies

15. (C) Opposition leaders complain that their weakness is the result of a focused and determined government strategy to target opposition meetings, financing, office space and travel of political leaders. "We're like two boxers with one boxer fighting with his hands tied behind his back. We keep coming up for another round and getting knocked out," the flamboyant Shovket describes while taking another drag from her cigarette holder. She adds that her local party offices have been systematically closed down and party workers are routinely denied access to the media and cannot even meet openly. Shovket has complained to the Embassy that when traveling through Azerbaijan, authorities consistently prevent her from meeting with party members.

16. (C) A trimmed down and confident Isa Gambar takes a more defiant stance. He asks rhetorically, "If the opposition is so genuinely weak, what is the government afraid of? Why can't we be shown on TV? Why can't we meet? Why are they arresting journalists?" Opposition presidential candidate and former Heydar Aliyev adviser Eldar Namazov describes a relentless campaign to keep him out of the public eye. He recalled how the police prevented him from renting a tea house in Guba to hold a private celebration of his party's anniversary.

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17. (C) Opposition parties in Azerbaijan's regions complain of similar problems. In Tovuz, regional opposition party representatives report that if as few as four of them gather at a teahouse, police break up the "meeting" and detain and question the participants. In Ganja, oppositionists report having to throw fake birthday parties in private homes on the outskirts of town to be able to conduct routine party meetings. The Ganja branch of the Musavat Party's office was broken into and vandalized, reportedly by the police. The landlord kicked the party out the next day.

The Devil Within

18. (C) The other often discussed reason for the steady decline of the Azerbaijani opposition has been its consistent divisiveness, inexperience and personality-based politics. Sitting in his palatial office in one of the most expensive downtown neighborhoods, the ruling Yeni Azerbaijan Party's (YAP) Executive Secretary Ali Ahmadov attributes the weakness of the opposition to a lack of fresh faces and new ideas. "The opposition made some strange decisions in past elections, always talking about boycotting and then choosing to participate. They lack a political program and instead only focus on individual leaders. If the same guy loses the elections time after time, people get tired of voting for him. Look at John Kerry. No one supports him running again," remarked Ahmadov.

19. (C) The Chairman of the Central Election Commission Mazahir Panahov, a well-connected official in a supposedly nonpartisan position, said that because of 70 years of Soviet rule, Azerbaijanis have plenty of experience in governance, but none in opposition. "All the opposition programs look the same and none of them have political platforms. Their platforms are, 'Let's go hold a demonstration in the town square,'" Panahov commented.

110. (C) In unguarded moments, opposition leaders themselves admit a lack of leadership. Shovket said she has publicly criticized the opposition for its inability to present a

united front against pressure from the government. Shovket was elected in 2005 to Parliament, but refused the seat as a protest against electoral fraud in other parliamentary races.

Similarly, Ali Kerimli commented that the opposition leaders themselves often admit that they are too passive. Eldar Namazov said that amongst the traditional opposition (from which he excludes himself) there is no one with significant political experience and most of them were responsible for mishandling the early stages of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict during former President Albufaz Elchibey's administration.

¶11. (C) Over the past few years, the opposition has continued to splinter, resulting in a greater number of tiny parties gathered around insignificant leaders with big egos. Perhaps the most spectacular example was this year's split of the Azerbaijan Democratic Party. The party was previously united around exiled former Speaker of Parliament Rasul Guliyev, who in 2005 attempted unsuccessfully to return to Azerbaijan. The party that retained the Azerbaijan Democratic Party name is headed by Guliyev's former deputy Sardar Jalaloglu, who recently announced that the party will support Ilham Aliyev's candidacy in the 2008 presidential election. Guliyev's few remaining supporters now make up the Open Society Party, which appears obsessed with the prospect of another potential homecoming attempt by Guliyev. Shovket remarked "A man keeps his word. If (Guliyev) had come back, he would have spent a few years in jail and emerged a leader. Now he is nothing."

It's Not Business, It's Personal

¶12. (C) Opposition leaders are quick to recall the golden age of Heydar Aliyev when opposition parties were allowed to operate with relative freedom. They ascribe the changes to personal weakness and insecurity on the part of President Ilham Aliyev. "The difference between Ilham and his father is that Ilham wants the oil money for himself. It's like a narcotic. Whereas, Heydar saw money as a political tool, not a goal unto itself. Heydar was able to balance opposition leaders. It was like theater for him," remarked Lala Shovket. "He understood that imitation of democracy was

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essential. Now we don't even have an imitation," she added.

Similarly, Eldar Namazov described Heydar Aliyev as a "very experienced politician and a self-made man." Whereas, Ilham just parachuted in with no real political experience.

¶13. (C) According to Ali Kerimli, the government pursues this policy of suppressing the opposition because of Ilham Aliyev's personal fears. "Heydar Aliyev allowed political activity, but controlled activity. He was always more careful about the West. Ilham claims to have Western political standards, but in reality his interests are personal and business-focused, not professional. He fears debates and press conferences and does not want competition," he argued.

¶14. (C) By contrast, Isa Gambar believes that Ilham, bolstered by oil wealth, has a sense of confidence that his father lacked. Gambar quoted former Russian Finance Minister Yegor Gaidar, but noted that this is equally true of Azerbaijan: "As the oil wealth of a country increases, the intellectual capacity of its government decreases." Gambar asserted that Heydar Aliyev was afraid of foreigners and would go only up to the limits set by the international community. With his son, the international community, and its money, have little influence.

The "Pocket Opposition"

¶15. (C) The Azerbaijani Government appears to have been working steadily over the years to create a new, alternative opposition to replace what it calls the "radical opposition"

parties such as Musavat, Popular Front and the Liberal Party.

The traditional opposition and some NGO activists are disparaging of the so-called "pocket opposition" groups, thought to include the Ana Veten (Motherland) Party, the Umid (Hope) Party, the Civil Solidarity Party, and the Azerbaijan Democratic Reforms Party, which they note consistently support government positions. The Ana Veten Party, for example, routinely floats ideas that would benefit the government but are too controversial for the ruling party to touch. In 2006, the party proposed extending the presidential term to seven years. Like the more established opposition parties, these new "pocket opposition" groups have murky finances and flashy new cars, leaving them lacking credibility in the eyes of the public.

Comment: A Dangerous Trend

¶16. (C) The traditional political opposition is a spent force. Even without the intense government pressure, they now lack legitimacy in the eyes of most Azerbaijanis, and seem to spend most of their time concerned with their international appearance rather than trying to find a domestic foothold. They criticize government corruption, but they themselves cannot explain how they finance their own limited activities. Notably, none of the major opposition parties have cultivated new younger leadership, which leads some to question how democratic they are in managing their organizations.

¶17. (C) "A democracy requires a strong opposition," declared ruling party Executive Secretary Ahmadov, echoing private statements by President Aliyev. Without a viable political opposition, voices of dissent and opposition will find other outlets. Both CEC Chairman Panahov and presidential candidate Namazov believed that a weak political opposition creates opportunities for Islamic extremism. "Islam is now slowly taking the place of political opposition because the reaction to injustices in society," Namazov cautioned. Panahov also believed that the real threat to the government was not the weak opposition, but the growing numbers of Islamists in society.

¶18. (C) Finally, the other possible outlet for challenging President Ilham Aliyev is within his own government and ruling party. One school of thought suggests that the tightly interwoven financial concerns of many key officials make it unlikely that any current ministers would be willing to rock the political boat. On the other hand, while the traditional opposition lacks the money, street power and credibility to mount a serious challenge to the Aliyevs, many

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of the President's own ministers (notably the power ministers, including the ambitious Minister of Emergency Situations) have all of these capabilities. The question is whether they have the nerve. The arrest and humiliation of former ministers Farhad Aliyev and Ali Insanov in 2005 was clearly meant to warn other powerful ministers against becoming too independent. Certainly part of the President's gradual replacement of key cabinet ministers is intended to balance political forces, but also ensure those who were once loyal to the father, remain loyal to the son.

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